Ryan Padraig Kelly

Sophie decided to spend what she had coined *her crone years* high in the mountains in a tiny cottage. Her family thought this was a terrible idea and that was precisely why she knew it was a good one.

It was surprisingly inexpensive to acquire one—but after that the real work began. Supplies, repairs, figuring out how the hell to make bread. But that first loaf that came out perfectly…

“I am crone, and I am free!” she shouted to the wind.

She hiked down to the village every other day and gradually crowded her cottage shelves with teacups in every colour along with trinkets that served no purpose but to please her. She filled her pantry with everything she needed by week, made glorious soups and greeted every morning sunrise from her bath near the largest window.

Then she started to paint.

She had collected every colour, her true purpose in coming to this little cottage life. Now the colours needed out. She set up her first canvas, spread out her many

paints and let the colours the sun had sent that day be her guide. The hours alone, colour her only companion, made her feel just as she had imagined they would.

She had just one neighbour, Hal, a salt-and-pepper fellow of five words or less. This suited her just fine. She had not come all the way up a mountain for company.

“I have a freshwater spring on my side,” he informed her on their first meeting. “Had a deal with the last tenant to bring some over every other day. You interested?”

She was. Hal treated it himself. It was a luxury to replace the boiled tap water she currently endured.

“I am not the tenant,” she informed him. “I’m the owner.”

Hal looked at all the half-started repairs, then at Sophie with her graying bun and sniffed, “I give you two weeks.”

The next time he came he caught her on the phone. It was not easy to operate a phone this far from civilization. Sophie had hoped it would be more of a deterrent then it was proving to be.

“I hear you, yes,” she said, trying to wrap it up as Hal quietly waited

on her tiny veranda. “But the *point* is for you not to know where I am.”

She listened patiently to the complaints of several people on the other end.

“I’m sure you’d like to visit, but I don’t wish to be visited.”

Then she hung up the phone with a firm click. The window was wide open. She knew Hal heard everything. He said nothing about it as he put the water on her counter with strong arms. Then he slowly took stock of the sink repairs she was attempting.

“You’ve got the elbow upside down,” he said.

He picked up the spare she had on the counter.

“It goes like this,” he showed her, turning it upside down.

She quietly swore. She had tried everything but that.

“Would you like some soup?” she asked him. “With bread?”

“You made bread?” he asked then seemed to regret blurting it, his enthusiasm for bread out before he could stop it.

She smiled and cut them both a slice, then ladled them each a nice bowl of soup.

He sat down across from her at her counter, pushing the pipe repair pieces aside and took in the rest of the cottage. Today was a red day. She had her little red teacup out and a teapot with strawberries on it, wore a red sweater over her dress and had the sofa cushions, blanket and flowers in her place all red as well.

His eyebrows gave away the expression his beard tried to hide.

“Is it always going to be red now?”

Sophie laughed.

“No, just today.”

“What will tomorrow be?”

“I let the sunrise decide,” she told him.

Those eyebrows lifted.

“Free to change colours,” she murmured into her red teacup. “Do you ever change yours?”

He gave a huff of almost laughter, “A source of complaint in my previous life was that I never do. I am as you see me, and nothing more.”

Sophie studied his colours as he trekked the narrow, winding path away from her cottage and back to his. Hal was firm, solid, forest neutrals, as solitary as the trees around him and as plain as the

stone. The way he belonged to the mountain made him peaceful to be around. That was his colour, she decided. His colour was peace.

Soon the cottage was crowded with paintings: teacups and skies, flowers and trees, pies and bread. Sophie painted everything, every treasure the mountain and her life here brought her. The steam from a good cuppa. The clouds after a storm. The little vines on the rockface of the mountain.

Hal stayed every other day for lunch, sometimes reading a book while she painted. He wore green

on a green day some weeks later and laughed in delight.

“Well, lookee here, I match the day, do I?”

Sophie shook her head at him as she ladled soup into two green bowls.

“Why are you up here?” he asked her as they ate. “There’s a lot of places a person could escape to,” he added cautiously.

He didn’t ask much, honestly. His comfortable silences had come to be one of her mountain treasures. They shifted colour to match whatever day she found herself in.

That peace a neutral that belonged to every colour.

“Back home I lived in grays,” she said simply. “And not just around my family. Being crowded…it doesn’t suit me. Up here I can be every colour, as often as I please.”

Hal said nothing to this but invited her to hike around to his side sometime and watch the sunset. His cottage was very like him, stoic and minimal with a solid wood veranda looking out to the horizon. The woodwork all done by hand.

He fussed and cursed as he walked her back around through the dark.

“Don’t push it—”

“Sophie, mind the edge—”

“For christsakes it’s *dark* Sophie—”

And Sophie realized she had made a friend.

Her mountain life was all very peaceful until the day she took some of her paintings into town to see if anyone wanted them. They turned out to be quite popular and she returned to the cottage empty-handed, thrilled to tell Hal her cherished hobby had given her some pocket money and brought a little joy.

But the next day, Deidre Green hiked all the way up the mountain from the village, holding one of

Sophie’s paintings of a teacup and banged down the door to be let in. She barged in, ignoring Hal’s, “Only *you* would think it’s your *right* to be let in Deidre Green!” and propped the painting in a chair.

“Watch this!” Deidre declared.

Then she reached her hand *into the painting,* and retrieved the cup of tea, pulling it out steaming and very real. She took a sip.

“It’s delicious! Your paintings are *magic*!”

The idea of magic had always delighted Sophie, but she had never seen any real magic of her own—just the suggestion of it in

beautiful things. This irrefutable proof was absolutely wild.

The magic seemed to last as long as the paintings did. Sophie was inundated with requests: gorgeous beaches, stunning ballrooms, highly specific cakes, jewelry, clothes. The villagers wanted it all. Hal watched her paint until she was exhausted, and his grump since the discovery of her magic intensified.

“They can *wait,* Sophie,” he growled one particularly bad day when an unexpected downpour set her back on her latest beach painting before she hurried it inside. “Don’t lose your joy of it.”

She burned a soup and ruined a bread and forgot to pick a new colour one morning. She was quite flush with cash, which was unexpected. Hal caught her counting it one morning, her mouth hanging open in disbelief.

“Oh, well, counting up your *earnings, are you*?” he barked. “I supposed you will head off to be rich and famous now with your new *gift*!”

Sophie gaped at him in surprise.

“What on earth? No. I thought I might improve the pipes though. Get some reliable plumbing at last. Improve that big window I love.”

“You can’t be serious,” he scoffed.

“Are you saying you’d miss me?” she teased.

“I said no such thing.”

But he had. He had. Sophie gave him a sidelong look.

“Why haven’t *you* asked me for a painting?”

“Why haven’t you made *yourself* a painting?” he countered.

Sophie sat back in her chair, “The real art is *being here*,” she said. “I want the real thing, not an imitation of it.”

Hal hesitated, his steaming coffee in his hands. He rarely hesitated about anything.

“That’s why I’m up here,” he said quietly. “I want the real things—not the imitations.”

That understanding, Sophie realized, was a treasure she didn’t know she needed.

The next day, she finally caught up with her long list of commissions. She flopped down on her sofa—yellow everything today—and took a nap. When Hal hiked over, she had no lunch ready, but he surprised her with a travel container of piping hot stew.

“I’m no chef,” he warned. “But I had a feeling you wouldn’t cook today. You had, what, fifteen left?”

She nodded, exhausted.

“I’m taking a break,” she said. “Actually, a full hiatus, possibly retirement.”

“Good.”

She waited until the stew was cleaned away and their cherished comfortable silence had soothed all her nerves. Hal often brought a book. His cottage was full of them. They were his treasures. He was reading one now, his glasses low on his nose, his feet on her coffee table.

“I made you one,” she said.

“Made me what?”

“A painting.”

He looked startled.

“Why?”

“I want you to have this one.”

“You shouldn’t have,” he said gruffly, his beard hiding his real feelings.

“It’s a bit big, I can help you carry it home if you like.”

She walked out with it and watched him study it long and hard.

“Is this a joke?” he asked.

“It is not,” she confirmed.

“Sophie, it’s blank.”

“It’s not blank.”

“There are no colours,” he said. “Is that how you think of me?”

“I want you to hang it up when you get home,” she said.

He looked very offended. Snatched it from her hands.

“Fine.”

He accepted no help carrying it awkwardly the long hike back around to his cottage and all Sophie could do was wait. And hope.

The time passed that was Hal’s usual hike home. Sophie went to

the little hall between her rooms where she had hung a matching canvas to the one she gifted Hal. She waited. And waited.

Finally, the canvas shifted, just as she'd hoped it would when she painted it. A moment later Hal was staring back at her through the painting, as though a door had opened between their cottages, as easily as if they were a room apart.

Sophie grinned.

"You didn't…" Hal gasped.

"I did," she confirmed. "Now you can come whenever you like. Watch the sunrise *and* the sunset. Match whatever colour takes my

fancy—if you want to?” she finished uncertainly.

Maybe she’d gone too far.

But Hal’s face slowly bloomed into a delight his beard could not hide. She had made more than a friend. The best surprise of this cottage life. A better magic than her colours becoming enchanted paintings. This was a colour with no name.

“I want to,” he said, and stepped through to meet her.